Nation and Assassination in the Middle East

by Martin Kramer

Until modern times, there existed no form of legitimacy in the Middle East outside of Islam. Rulers ruled in the name of God; assassins struck them down in the name of God. The assassinations of the early caliphs and the struggle between the Sunni rulers and the Assassins in the Middle Ages took precisely this form: each side claimed to act in accord with divine will, revealed in divine texts. Religion played a crucial role in the rationale of assassination, but it also played a crucial role in the rationale of government, law, and warfare—indeed, of everything. This invocation of God by the ruler and his assassin characterized the entire pre-modern period in the Islamic world, right up to the end of the nineteenth century.

Assassination in modern times may be divided roughly into three sequential stages, in which the rationales shift dramatically. In the first stage, rulers continued to rule in the name of God as they always had, but their assassins claimed to act in the name of the nation. In the second stage, rulers themselves claimed to rule in the name of the nation; the assassins also claimed to act on behalf of the nation in striking them down. In the third stage, the present one, rulers still claim to rule in the name of the nation, but it is now assassins who claim to act in the name of God. This essay will briefly illustrate these three stages with examples.

ORDINARY MEN

The break with the pre-modern pattern first occurs at around the turn of the century when the "shadows of God," traditional Muslim rulers, for the first time faced assassins who were inspired by nationalism and who claimed to be acting on behalf of the people. The origins of national awakening and nationalist assassination can be traced to the same person: Sayyid Jamal ad-Din "al-Afghani," the Persian activist and agitator who carried the message of national revival across the Islamic world during the 1880s and 1890s.

Afghani is counted as a hero of national revival. He figures in every account of the emergence of modern, liberal interpretations of Islam, and he is hailed as a great reformer and progressive. But he was also a conspirator who plotted assassinations. To bring about national revival, he believed that the rulers of the day had

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An ordinary man. *Mirza Riza Kirmani, disciple of Jamal ad-Din "al-Afghani" and assassin of Nasir ad-Din Shah. "I said to myself [Kirmani told his interrogators], 'The Tree of Tyranny must be cut down at the roots.'"*

to be removed, if necessary by the bullet. A disciple once found him pacing back and forth, shouting, "There is no deliverance except in killing, there is no safety except in killing."

These were not idle words. On one occasion, Afghani proposed to a follower, the reformist thinker Muhammad Abduh, that the ruler of Egypt, the Khedive Ismail, be assassinated. As Abduh said, Afghani "proposed to me that Ismail should be assassinated some day as he passed in his carriage daily over the Kasr el Nil bridge, and I strongly approved, but it was only talk between ourselves. ... It would have been the best thing that could have happened."[1] This tells us much not only about Afghani but about Abduh, also celebrated in the West for his liberal ideas.

Afghani had more luck in inspiring a disciple to assassinate Nasir ad-Din Shah, ruler of Iran, in 1896. It is interesting to relate what Afghani said about that assassination:

> Surely it was a good deed to kill this bloodthirsty tyrant, this Nero on the Persian throne ... who nonetheless knew how to throw sand in the eyes of civilized Europe so that it did not recognize his deeds. It was well done then to kill him, for it may be a warning to others. This is the first time that a Shah has found his death not in a palace revolution but at the hand of an ordinary man, and thus for a tyrant to receive just recompense for his deeds.[2]

Afghani rightly identifies a turning point in the assassination of Nasir ad-Din Shah: the shah deserved to die not for deviating from religion, but for betraying the nation. The assassin, this "ordinary man," had acted on behalf of all ordinary men—on the behalf of the people. The traditional rulers—the shahs of Iran and the Ottoman sultans—had built their defenses in their claim to rule by will of God. But suddenly here appeared new nationalisms that ignored this claim, creating a new rationale for assassination: sovereignty belonged to the "ordinary man," who had the right to freedom from tyranny. Assassination by the "ordinary man" in an era of populist nationalism tended to level the moral ground, making possible the later emergence of the assassin as national hero.

Modern technology also made it possible for the "ordinary man" to reach the divine-right ruler, who once had been so remote. In 1905, a carriage packed with explosives just missed killing Sultan Abdulhamid in a major square in Istanbul. The ruler now had to fear more than the dagger and the poison of the palace plots. Another kind of plot, hatched among conspirators in secret societies or the army, and justified in the name of the nation, could claim him just as readily.

1 Quoted by Nikki R. Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din "al-Afghani"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), p. 114.

2 Ibid., p. 412.

to assassination to remove a "traitor."

Another assassin who ended as ruler was Saddam Hussein. In 1959, the twenty-two-year-old Saddam and a group of young Baathists decided to assassinate the then-ruler of Iraq, 'Abd al-Karim Qassem, a military man who had crushed the monarchy and established himself as "Sole Leader." Saddam and his colleagues planned to ambush Qassem's motorcade. Saddam was not supposed to fire at Qassem, only to provide cover. But according to his semiofficial biography, "when he found himself face to face with the dictator, he was unable to restrain himself. He forgot all his instructions and immediately opened fire."[5] However, Qassem was only wounded, and Saddam fled abroad.

For Sadat and Saddam, conspiracy to assassinate was preparation for more complex conspiracies.

After Saddam's ascent to power, this experience as a fledgling assassin, far from being deemed a liability, became a deliberately cultivated part of the Saddam myth. In Iraq, there were television shows and even a movie on the tribulations of the heroic young assassin. He is wounded in his brave attempt; he extracts a bullet from his flesh with a knife; he gallops across the desert on a horse; he swims to freedom across the icy Tigris with a knife between his teeth. Here is the assassin as hero, as a role model of commitment and self-sacrifice.

In the cases of Sadat and Saddam, we see how conspiracy to assassinate becomes a rite of passage and valuable preparation for more complex conspiracies to come—those that will carry the plotter to power. To have been an assassin is a credential that enhances the aura of the ruler. And as such, it is inspiration for the next generation of assassins. Assassins cut down Sadat; Saddam, who was cannier, managed to escape them, despite many attempts. The nationalists, from Afghani onward, made assassination heroic; once in power, they could not stop its cyclical repetition, now directed against them.

HOLY MURDER

I come now very briefly to the last stage, which is the present predicament. The rulers rule on, ostensibly in the name of the nation. But since the widespread revival of Islam as an idiom of protest, it is the *assassins* who claim to act in the name of God. The first revival of assassination in the name of Islam may be traced in the deeds of the Muslim Brethren in Egypt, whose members assassinated Egypt's prime minister, Nuqrashi Pasha, in 1948. There were also the actions of Iran's Devotees of Islam, who assassinated Prime Minister Ali Razmara in 1951. Islamists were suppressed in both Egypt and Iran in the 1950s and 1960s but came back with a roar in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. In Egypt, Islamists assassinated President Sadat in 1981, and in 1995 they came close to assassinating President Mubarak in Ethiopia with an attack on his motorcade.

In Iran, the Islamists made a revolution but failed to assassinate the shah, who managed to get away, and then died of his cancer. One might argue that the shah's assassination has been an absent element in the heroic narrative of the revolution. Some compensation was found in the fact that the ruler who gave refuge to the shah, Egypt's Sadat, met his death at the hands of an Islamist assassin. Iran's official approval for this act found symbolic expression in 1982 when it issued a stamp in the assassin's honor. The stamp showed the assassin, Khalid Islambuli, shouting defiantly from behind bars. The city of Tehran renamed a street after the assassin: it became Khalid Islambuli Avenue. The street bore that name until January 2004 when Iran decided to mend fences with Egypt and instructed the city to rename the street Intifada Avenue.

In sum, we may look back at the last century as one in which religion, as the motive force of assassination, surrendered primacy of place

5 Quoted in Efraim Karsh and Inari Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein: A Political Biography* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), p. 18.

to nationalism. But that surrender, it seems, was only temporary. Religious assassins are now back claiming victims, who in some cases themselves have been assassins. We may also look back at this century as a continuation of that long tradition of authoritarian if not absolute rule, of the kind that has always fed assassination with legitimacy and sympathy, no matter how it is packaged.

Alas, assassination itself is unlikely to change this tradition. "Surely it was a good deed to kill this bloodthirsty tyrant," said Afghani. Perhaps, but as this only ushers in the next tyrant, the Middle East may be said to be locked in a tragic cycle of tyranny and tyrannicide. By and large, assassination in the Middle East does not stir the same revulsion as it does in the democracies of the West, and it will not do so until its peoples have a say in who governs them.